

TALKING IT OVER

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It's fairly easy to disregard dangers to ourselves. We might go out with a fever or cross against the light, but we would never let our children do the same.

When it comes to kids, the rules are different. Our concern for children -- if not for ourselves -- should enable us to face the facts about climate change. Global warming, as we learned at a conference my husband convened this week at Georgetown University, is not just an abstract scientific issue. It is a fundamental health and safety issue that will have a profound impact on the lives of children the world over.

At Georgetown, scientists presented research making it clear our climate is changing. Rising concentrations of carbon dioxide and other gases released when fossil fuels are burned are warming the Earth's atmosphere. While we don't know exactly how much or how fast temperatures are rising, we do know that global warming is taking place.

Today, one of the biggest threats to children is disease -- particularly disease rooted in environmental causes. Millions of children under the age of 5 die every year from preventable, easily treated conditions. As I learned at the conference, these health problems are likely to get worse if we do not do something about climate change.

Let me give you just one example: the spread of infectious diseases.

In 1995, infectious diseases -- like malaria, cholera and yellow fever -- killed more than 17 million people worldwide. Nine million of those were children.

Increases in temperature hasten the spread of infectious diseases for two reasons. First, they shorten incubation periods. That means disease-carrying viruses, bacteria and parasites can reproduce and spread faster. Second, cool temperatures protect parts of the world from certain diseases, serving as an important line of defense. Tropical diseases that can survive in hot, humid climates just aren't going to make it in colder ones. Unless temperatures rise.

Take a disease like malaria, which is spread primarily by mosquitoes. There are half a billion cases of malaria every year. In 1995, 2.1 million of these resulted in death -- mostly to children under the age of 5.

For this reason, higher temperatures should be a matter of real concern. Areas that were previously free of malaria mosquitoes, such as mountainous regions in Rwanda and Kenya, are now reporting an influx of the insects. In Costa Rica and Colombia, mosquitoes that were never seen above 1,000 meters have been spotted at twice that altitude.

In fact, according to one study, as a consequence of climate change, the percentage of the world's population at risk to malaria could increase from 45 percent to 60 percent. And the United States is not immune.

Climate change has the potential to exacerbate other problems that imperil children, including respiratory conditions like asthma. Already, nearly 5 million American children suffer from asthma, and that number is rising.

This is one important reason why the President is working to forge a plan of action to address this threat. Any approach to reducing greenhouse-gas emissions will take time, however, for it will require the cooperation of all sectors of society and the participation of governments around the world.

Fortunately, any one of us can act now. There are simple things we can do in our daily lives to help slow global warming.

For starters, we can conserve energy, reducing the emissions linked to climate change. We can insulate our houses; we can make sure the appliances in our homes are energy-efficient; we can do what my dad used to do every time he left an empty room -- turn off the lights.

While Bill and I don't have a house of our own, we have taken steps at the White House to cut energy usage.

The new energy-efficient lights that illuminate the White House at night have reduced energy consumption by 51 percent. New lighting inside the White House complex is also cutting power usage substantially. There's a state-of-the-art refrigerator downstairs that exceeds energy-efficiency standards by 30 percent, and a new air cooling system that is projected to save more than 400,000 kilowatts of electricity every year.

Not only are these changes saving a lot in energy bills every year, they are expected to keep more than 5.5 million pounds of global-warming greenhouse gases out of the atmosphere by reducing the need for electricity generated by fossil-fuel-burning power plants.

I know these are small steps. But sometimes, small steps can walk us a long way toward solving a big problem. Every time my dad turned off a light switch, he saved something for his children. By acting now to reduce climate change, we can each, in our own way, safeguard the world for our children, their children and generations beyond.

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